

# **Analysis - When Democracy Becomes Destruction - The Reality of Conflicts in the Middle East and the Shadow of a Global War**

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## **Strategic Idealism and Systemic Reality**

The foreign policy of the United States in the Middle East since the beginning of the 21st century reveals a persistent structural tension between normative universalism and strategic rationality. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not merely represent the removal of an authoritarian regime; it constituted a systemic inflection point in the regional security architecture. By attempting to combine political transformation with military supremacy, Washington inaugurated a cycle of instability whose effects extended beyond the Iraqi theater and altered the geopolitical balance of the Levant, the Gulf, and, indirectly, the international order itself.

The central argument of this article maintains that the attempt to promote democracy through armed intervention, within the broader context of the war on terror and strategic containment, produced unintended consequences that weakened regional stability, broadened the scope of action for revisionist powers, and increased the risk of indirect escalations with systemic potential. Democracy, when instrumentalized as a vector of foreign policy engineering, ceased to operate as a universal normative value and began to function as a catalyst for violent power rearrangements.

This analysis engages with the classic strategic tradition of *On War*, especially concerning the primacy of the political over the military. Clausewitz warned that war is the continuation of politics by other means, implying that coherence between ends and means constitutes an essential requirement of strategic rationality. In the Iraqi case, the rapid military victory contrasted with the absence of adequate political planning for the post-conflict period, revealing a disconnect between the normative objective (democratization) and the structural reality (sectarian fragmentation and regional power struggles).

At the same time, the analytical framework is illuminated by the structural realist perspective of *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, according to which competition between great powers is a permanent condition of the international system. The American intervention in Iraq, instead of consolidating uncontested hegemony, opened space for greater projection of actors such as Iran and Russia, while simultaneously exposing the material and political limits of American primacy. The Middle East has gradually transformed from an arena of unilateral intervention into a field of indirect multipolar competition.

The dimension of strategic coercion, explored in *Arms and Influence*, also offers an essential framework for understanding the post-2003 dynamics. The logic of deterrence and signaling presupposes credibility, escalation control, and clarity of objectives. However, when political objectives are diffuse — such as “promoting democracy” in an environment of structural fragmentation — coercion loses focus and escalation becomes difficult to calibrate. The result is a spiral of gradual engagements, asymmetrical responses, and a multiplication of armed actors that challenge strategic predictability. The invasion of Iraq, in this sense, should be interpreted less as an isolated episode and more as the starting point of a cumulative process of erosion of the regional order. The dissolution of Iraqi state institutions not only disrupted the internal balance between Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds, but also altered the balance of power between Saudi Arabia and Iran, reinforcing the sectarian dimension of geopolitical rivalry. The institutional vacuum facilitated the emergence of insurgencies, transnational radicalization, and subsequently, the consolidation of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

This trajectory illustrates a central paradox: the intervention conceived to reduce future threats ended up generating new structural threats. The preventive war, justified under the logic of strategic anticipation, produced externalities that broadened the field of instability. In systemic terms, the attempt at unilateral stabilization triggered redistributive power effects that strengthened revisionist actors and expanded zones of conflict.

Furthermore, the prolonged American military presence in the Middle East contributed to redefining the global perception of the international order. The legitimacy of the interventions was contested in multilateral forums,

generating fissures among allies and reinforcing alternative narratives of global governance. The international polarization resulting from these interventions fueled discourses of defensive sovereignty and opened space for greater strategic assertiveness of competing powers.

The cumulative impact of these dynamics transcends the regional scope. In an international system characterized by a transition to relative multipolarity, local conflicts tend to connect to broader structural disputes. The Middle East, traditionally the epicenter of energy and religious rivalries, has also become an intersection point between global geopolitical competition, the proliferation of advanced military technologies, and the expansion of hybrid forms of conflict.

Thus, the tension between strategic idealism and systemic reality is not merely a normative debate about democratic values, but a central problem of strategic coherence. When democratization is pursued through force, without a deep understanding of social structures and regional balances, the result may not be institutional consolidation, but prolonged fragmentation. Democracy, in this context, ceases to represent a horizon of stability and begins to function as a destabilizing variable within fragile political systems.

The shadow of a global war emerges precisely from this interconnection between persistent regional conflicts and rivalries between great powers. Escalation does not necessarily occur by deliberate decision, but may result from the accumulation of poorly managed crises, miscalculations, or prolonged indirect competition. The Middle East, with its concentration of sectarian rivalries, energy interests, and the presence of multiple external actors, remains one of the regions most susceptible to this type of systemic spillover.

Therefore, understanding the trajectory of American conflicts in the Middle East requires an analysis that integrates political, strategic, and systemic levels. It is not merely a matter of evaluating tactical successes or failures, but of examining how decisions made under the aegis of preventive security redefined regional balances and contributed to reshaping the international order. It is in this space between normative intention and strategic

consequence that the central question of this article lies: to what extent has the armed promotion of democracy paradoxically contributed to the expansion of the global instability it sought to contain?

### **Insurgency, Civil War, and the Rise of Extremism (2003–2011)**

The insurgency that emerged in Iraq after 2003 was not a homogeneous phenomenon, but a contingent convergence of three main vectors: Sunni nationalism displaced from power, sectarian radicalization, and transnational jihadism. The dissolution of the Iraqi state apparatus — especially the armed forces and the Ba’athist bureaucracy — not only produced mass unemployment among trained personnel but also disrupted the legitimate monopoly on violence. The result was an environment permissive to the proliferation of insurgent networks with partially overlapping agendas, but converging on the rejection of the occupation and the new political arrangement.

In this context, the Iraqi branch of Al-Qaeda, initially led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was able to instrumentalize Sunni resentment and the perception of political marginalization. The organization operated on two simultaneous fronts: attacks against coalition forces and a deliberate strategy of sectarian exacerbation through attacks against Shiite civilians. This logic aimed to trigger open civil war, fragment the nascent state, and prevent any institutional consolidation. The embryo of what would later become the self-proclaimed Islamic State emerged precisely from this combination of state vacuum, identity radicalization, and decentralized armed competition.

From a strategic point of view, the Iraqi case confirms On War’s classic warning about the friction and unpredictable nature of war when the political element is not properly integrated into military planning. The initial conventional victory created the illusion of decisive control. However, the absence of a robust plan for institutional reconstruction and the underestimation of sectarian divisions produced a misalignment between strategic ends and the means employed.

The insurgency also revealed the dynamic described by Arms and Influence, according to which effective coercion depends on credibility and clarity of objectives. When the stated objective — democratization — coexists with local perceptions of occupation and exclusion, coercion loses legitimacy and becomes fuel for prolonged resistance. The escalation becomes diffuse, with multiple actors capable of imposing asymmetrical costs.

Between 2006 and 2007, Iraq plunged into open sectarian violence. Shiite militias, some with links to Iran, consolidated territorial control in several areas, while Sunni insurgent groups intensified attacks. The state became fragmented not only politically, but also territorially. Competition for power took the form of identity politics, hindering any comprehensive national reconciliation.

The so-called “surge” of 2007 — a temporary reinforcement of American troops combined with a counterinsurgency strategy more focused on protecting the population — contributed to a significant reduction in immediate violence. The co-opting of Sunni tribes through the “Sons of Iraq” partially isolated Al-Qaeda in Iraq. However, this stabilization was contingent and tactical. The deep structures of sectarian rivalry, competition for resources, and institutional fragility remained unchanged.

From a systemic point of view, the period 2003–2011 highlighted the asymmetry between operational success and sustainable political consolidation. Temporary stabilization did not eliminate the structural conditions that fueled extremism. The fragmentation of the Iraqi political system, the centralization of power under Shiite leadership, and the persistent exclusion of Sunni segments created fertile ground for jihadist rearticulation years later. Furthermore, the Iraqi insurgency produced significant regional effects. The conflict became an indirect battleground between the United States and Iran. Tehran expanded its influence through support for Shiite militias, consolidating strategic depth in post-Saddam Iraq. This redistribution of power altered the regional balance and reinforced the perception, among Washington’s Sunni allies, that American intervention had inadvertently strengthened its main regional rival.

Domestically in the United States, the human cost — thousands of soldiers killed and tens of thousands wounded — and the financial cost, estimated at trillions of dollars throughout the occupation and reconstruction cycle, eroded political consensus. The perception of an “endless war” contributed to strategic retreat and interventionist fatigue. In structural terms, the Iraqi insurgency became a symbol of hegemonic erosion, fueling global narratives of relative decline for the United States.

Structural realist analysis, as articulated in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, suggests that prolonged interventions in peripheral environments can divert strategic resources from central arenas of great power competition. The intense involvement in Iraq coincided with China’s economic and military rise and Russia’s gradual assertive revitalization. While the causal relationship is not linear, the prolonged allocation of strategic attention to the Middle East had implications for the global balance of power.

Ultimately, the period of insurgency and civil war in Iraq demonstrated that the external imposition of regime change, without deep integration of internal power dynamics, tends to produce prolonged cycles of violence. The insurgency was not merely a residual reaction, but a structural expression of a political system abruptly reconfigured. The initial military victory proved insufficient to guarantee lasting political stability.

The legacy of this period transcends Iraqi borders. It consolidated hybrid conflict models, in which non-state actors operate as instruments of indirect competition between states, and reinforced the perception that democratization imposed by force can generate strategic vacuums exploitable by extremists. Thus, the Iraqi insurgency was not merely a local chapter of violence, but a decisive component in the reconfiguration of regional security and in the expansion of systemic uncertainties that continue to cast shadows on global stability.

## **Afghanistan (2001–2021): The Prolonged Conflict and Strategic Exhaustion**

The intervention in Afghanistan, initiated in October 2001 as a direct response to the September 11 attacks, was initially conceived as a punitive operation to dismantle terrorist networks. The strategic objective was clear and limited: to neutralize Al-Qaeda and remove the Taliban regime that sheltered it. However, the rapid collapse of the Taliban government led to a gradual expansion of the mission. What began as a counterterrorism campaign progressively transformed into an ambitious project of state reconstruction and institutional engineering.

This shift in objectives reveals a recurring pattern in post-Cold War interventions: the incremental expansion of political goals without a corresponding structural reassessment of means and limits. The logic of the “expanded mission” has placed the United States and its NATO allies in a prolonged effort to build democratic institutions, national security forces, and civilian infrastructure in a country characterized by ethnic fragmentation, entrenched tribalism, and a historical tradition of resistance to central authorities.

From the classic strategic perspective of *On War*, the Afghan case illustrates the risks of disconnecting political ends from the nature of the operational theater. War, as an instrument of politics, demands clarity of purpose and coherence between military strategy and ultimate political objective. In Afghanistan, the transformation of a limited counterterrorism objective into an institutional reshaping project exponentially expanded the scope of engagement without altering the structural conditions that historically hinder the centralization of power in the country.

The Taliban insurgency, initially dispersed, reorganized itself in cross-border sanctuaries and exploited the fragility of the Afghan central government. The dynamics of the conflict came to reflect hybrid characteristics: limited conventional operations, asymmetric attacks, institutional infiltration, and instrumentalization of local networks. The technological and air superiority of the international coalition ensured tactical dominance, but did not prevent

insurgent resilience. The asymmetry between temporary territorial control and lasting political loyalty became the central dilemma.

From the perspective of strategic coercion, as analyzed in *Arms and Influence*, effectiveness depends on the credibility and clarity of signaling. In Afghanistan, the alternation between speeches of long-term commitment and announcements of progressive withdrawal weakened the perception of strategic determination. For local allies, doubt about American permanence reduced incentives for sustainable cooperation; for insurgents, it reinforced the narrative that resistance was sufficient to prevail in the long term.

The construction of Afghan security forces, although numerically significant, faced structural challenges of corruption, logistical dependence, and fragile internal cohesion. The institutionalization of a resilient state apparatus requires social legitimacy, administrative capacity, and a consolidated national identity — elements historically fragile in Afghanistan. The imported model of centralized governance contrasted with the decentralized and tribal reality of the country.

The final withdrawal of American forces in 2021, followed by the rapid collapse of the Afghan government and the Taliban's return to power, symbolized not only the end of a conflict but also the exhaustion of an interventionist paradigm. The image of the hasty evacuation in Kabul became a metaphor for the gap between strategic ambition and concrete political results. The military superiority accumulated over two decades proved insufficient to sustain a political order dependent on external support.

In systemic terms, the Afghan war also produced significant indirect effects. The prolonged allocation of human, financial, and strategic resources contributed to the phenomenon of strategic exhaustion — cumulative wear and tear that limits the capacity for future projection. This phenomenon occurred in parallel with the economic and military rise of China and greater Russian assertiveness in its regional environment. Although the causal relationship is not linear, the absorption of political and military capital in Afghanistan reduced American strategic flexibility in other arenas.

Furthermore, the conflict reinforced global narratives of resistance to external intervention. The Taliban's survival, despite two decades of international military pressure, has solidified the perception that insurgent actors can prevail through temporal resilience and tactical adaptation.

This perception resonates beyond Afghanistan, influencing the strategic calculations of insurgent movements and non-state actors in other contexts.

The Afghan experience also highlighted the structural limitations of externally imposed transformation. Democracy, as a political model, depends on internal conditions of legitimacy and cohesion. When associated with a prolonged foreign military presence, it risks being perceived as an exogenous imposition, weakening its social acceptance. The result is a permanent tension between institutional construction and dependence on external security guarantees.

From the perspective of global stability, Afghanistan did not become the immediate epicenter of war between major powers. However, the outcome of the conflict contributed to redefining perceptions of American strategic determination, fueling debates about the credibility of commitments in other sensitive regions. In an international system marked by a transition to relative multipolarity, perceptions of interventionist retreat or fatigue have implications that transcend the original theater of conflict.

In short, Afghanistan represents the paradigmatic case of strategic exhaustion resulting from the progressive expansion of political objectives beyond the structural capacity for execution. Military superiority guaranteed successive tactical victories, but did not produce sustainable political consolidation. The strategic lesson is clear: military power, while essential for neutralizing immediate threats, does not replace institutional legitimacy nor resolve deep historical fragmentations. The attempt to reshape complex societies through external force tends to generate dependence, resistance, and, ultimately, a reversal of the results obtained.

The Afghan conflict, therefore, should not be analyzed merely as a prolonged war, but as structural evidence of the limits of transformative interventionism. It consolidated a phase of strategic reassessment in the United States and contributed to the redefinition of the global debate on the scope and limits of military power in promoting lasting political order.

### **Syria and the Islamic State (2014–Present): Hybrid Warfare and Regional Multipolarity**

The emergence of the Islamic State in 2014 forced the United States to return militarily to Iraq and intervene in Syria through an international coalition. The air campaign and support for local Kurdish and Arab forces weakened the territorial caliphate, but the Syrian theater became a battleground for multiple actors: Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Western powers.

The Russian intervention in 2015 consolidated Moscow as an indispensable actor in the Levant, while Iran expanded its militia network and strategic influence. Syria has become a laboratory for hybrid warfare, where conventional operations coexist with cyber operations, propaganda, and the use of non-state actors. (expand and development)

### **Withdrawal, Return, and the Cycle of Instability**

The formal withdrawal of American forces from Iraq in 2011 was presented as a landmark ending a prolonged phase of occupation and as a sign of transition to full sovereign responsibility for the Iraqi government. However, the withdrawal did not signify strategic decoupling. The security architecture built over the previous decade remained fragile, dependent on external support, and riddled with deep sectarian divisions. What followed was an unwitting experiment in institutional autonomy within a structurally unstable environment.

The rapid deterioration of the security situation between 2012 and 2014 revealed that state consolidation was more superficial than it appeared. The political marginalization of Sunni sectors, combined with systemic corruption and the fragility of the security forces, created the conditions for the meteoric advance of the self-proclaimed Islamic State. The capture of Mosul in 2014 symbolized not only local military collapse but also the failure of a stabilization project that, despite years of investment, had not produced resilient institutions.

The partial return of the United States, through air support, military advice, and coordination with local forces, demonstrated the difficulty of breaking strategic ties created by previous interventions. Iraq had become, structurally, part of the American security perimeter in the Middle East. The withdrawal reduced physical presence but did not eliminate indirect responsibilities or regional expectations of continued engagement.

This pattern — initial intervention, withdrawal under internal political pressure, return in the face of a new threat — creates a cycle of cumulative instability. American absence creates a strategic vacuum that is quickly exploited by state and non-state actors. Prolonged presence, on the other hand, generates nationalist resistance, fuels narratives of occupation, and imposes significant human and financial costs. Foreign policy thus oscillates between retraction and re-engagement, without achieving sustainable stability.

This dynamic can be understood in light of the structural logic described in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, according to which great powers seek to preserve influence in strategic regions to prevent the rise of rivals. Iraq, situated between Iran, Turkey, and the Persian Gulf, represents a sensitive geopolitical space. The American withdrawal opened the way for the expansion of Iranian influence through militias and allied parties, altering the regional balance. The partial return, therefore, was not only a response to jihadist extremism but also an implicit movement of geopolitical containment.

From the perspective of strategic coercion, as explored in *Arms and Influence*, the cycle of withdrawal and return can affect credibility and perceived commitment. Regional allies tend to interpret abrupt exits as signs of strategic volatility, while adversaries may perceive an opportunity to test limits. The predictability of engagement becomes a central element in managing escalation and maintaining regional stability.

The very hybrid nature of the Islamic State — combining territorial control, transnational propaganda, and ideological mobilization — exposed weaknesses in the traditional conception of military victory. The group's territorial defeat, achieved with American support, did not eliminate its underground networks nor the social conditions that favored its rise. The American return mitigated the immediate threat but did not resolve the structural factors that allowed its emergence.

Furthermore, the cycle of instability has a relevant domestic dimension in the United States. The oscillation between withdrawal and re-engagement reflects tension between interventionist fatigue in public opinion and strategic imperatives perceived by foreign policy makers. This tension reduces long-term consistency and hinders coherent strategic planning.

In regional terms, the pattern of structural dependency reinforces the perception that Iraq's security remains anchored in external guarantees. This perception limits incentives for profound reforms and perpetuates a logic of outsourcing responsibility. Simultaneously, regional actors, such as Iran, use the political-military space to consolidate networks of indirect influence, deepening strategic competition.

The analysis of the intervention-withdrawal-return cycle therefore reveals a structural dilemma: the inability to remain indefinitely without increasing costs and the impossibility of withdrawing completely without risking institutional collapse. This is a strategic trap typical of prolonged asymmetric conflicts, in which the interventionist power becomes an integral part of the internal equilibrium of the target state.

This pattern contributes to amplifying systemic uncertainties. In an international environment marked by increasing competition between great powers, unstable regions become arenas of indirect dispute. Iraqi volatility, coupled with the intermittent American presence and the expansion of Iranian influence, increases the potential for incidents that could trigger unintended escalations.

In summary, the 2011 withdrawal and the partial return in 2014 are not isolated episodes, but manifestations of a broader structural logic. The initial intervention permanently altered the regional security ecosystem. From that point on, any decision — to remain or to withdraw — began to generate significant strategic costs. The cycle of instability thus became a direct consequence of the attempt to reshape the regional order through force, revealing the limits of military power in producing self-sustaining political stability.

### **Iran, Deterrence, and Escalation (2019–2026)**

The rivalry between the United States and Iran constitutes one of the structuring axes of security in the contemporary Middle East. From 2019 onwards, with the practical collapse of the nuclear agreement and the policy of “maximum pressure,” tensions evolved from indirect competition to open, low-intensity confrontation. The assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 represented a strategic turning point: it was the deliberate elimination of a central architect of Iranian projection through regional militia networks.

Soleimani’s death had a dual effect. Tactically, it temporarily disrupted the operational coordination of the Quds Force. Strategically, it consolidated the Iranian narrative of external aggression, reinforcing internal cohesion and legitimizing the expansion of the policy of asymmetric deterrence. The Iranian retaliation against American bases in Iraq signaled a willingness to respond, but also revealed a concern to calibrate the escalation to avoid open war.

The logic underlying this cycle of action and reaction is consistent with the theory of strategic coercion formulated in *Arms and Influence*.

Deterrence depends not only on destructive capacity, but also on credible communication of intent and tolerance threshold. In the US-Iran case, signaling occurs through limited attacks, mobilization of naval forces in the Gulf, economic sanctions, and the use of regional proxies. It is a competition for perceived resolve.

Between 2025 and 2026, the intensification of air strikes against targets associated with the Iranian military apparatus — combined with indirect retaliations via militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen — is part of this dynamic of coercive deterrence. The strategic risk does not necessarily lie in the declared intention of total war, but in the multiplicity of armed actors with varying degrees of operational autonomy. In densely militarized environments, miscalculations, intelligence failures, or disproportionate responses can produce unplanned escalations.

Over the last decade, Iran has adopted a power projection model based on “decentralized strategic depth.” Instead of direct conventional confrontation with American forces, it invested in building networks of influence through Shiite militias, support for Hezbollah, and regional tactical alliances. This arrangement expands its capacity for plausible deniability and complicates direct attribution of responsibility, hindering proportionate responses.

From the American perspective, the strategy combines regional containment, protection of freedom of navigation in the Gulf, and guaranteeing the security of allies. However, the oscillation between maximum pressure and attempts at diplomatic accommodation generates strategic ambiguity. Such ambiguity can be functional in maintaining flexibility, but it also creates uncertainty regarding the real limits of engagement.

The presence of Israel as a strategic ally of the United States and a declared adversary of Iran adds an additional layer of complexity. The Israeli perception of an existential threat associated with the Iranian nuclear

program raises the threshold of risk tolerance. Preemptive operations or sabotage attributed to Israel increase the possibility of an indirect Iranian response, potentially involving multiple simultaneous theaters.

The triangular interaction between the United States, Iran, and Israel creates an environment prone to the regionalization of the conflict. Any incident involving Israeli forces can trigger mechanisms of American solidarity, explicit or implicit, transforming a localized confrontation into a systemic crisis. In a context of high military density and the presence of non-state actors, escalation can occur incrementally, but cumulatively.

From a structural perspective inspired by *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, the dispute reflects a logic of competition for influence in a vital strategic region. The Persian Gulf concentrates critical energy resources and essential maritime routes. Indirect control or denial of access to this region alters the global balance of power. Thus, even if the rivalry appears regional, its implications are systemic.

Additionally, the evolution of the Iranian nuclear program introduces a qualitatively distinct dimension to the deterrence equation. Technological proximity with advanced enrichment capabilities reduces international response time and increases pressure for preventive decisions. In scenarios of uncertainty about ultimate intentions, the temptation for preemptive action grows — and with it the risk of strategic error.

Another factor of instability lies in the internal fragmentation of the international system. The growing competition between the United States, China, and Russia creates incentives for external powers to use regional crises as instruments of strategic bargaining. Even without direct involvement, diplomatic or technological support to one side alters perceptions of cost and benefit, broadening the strategic framework.

The escalation between 2019 and 2026 demonstrates that deterrence in the Middle East does not operate on classic bipolar models. It is a regional multipolar system with overlapping ideological, sectarian, and geopolitical

rivalries. The absence of robust institutional crisis management channels increases vulnerability to hasty decisions.

In short, the US-Iran axis remains characterized by calibrated competition, but is structurally unstable. Coercive deterrence has prevented total war, but has not eliminated the possibility of accidental escalation. In an environment where armed actors operate through decentralized networks and where local decisions can generate global repercussions, the strategic risk lies less in the declared intention of conflict and more in the complexity of the system that surrounds it.

## **Regional and Global Impacts**

The transformation of conflicts in the Middle East over the last two decades has not only produced internal rearrangements. It has generated strategic externalities that have reconfigured regional dynamics and influenced the international balance. The interconnection between state destabilization, population flows, and geopolitical polarization has amplified the scale of the consequences, shifting them from the regional to the systemic level.

### **Regional Destabilization**

The overthrow of authoritarian regimes without a structured institutional transition created power vacuums that were quickly filled by militias, sectarian factions, and jihadist organizations. The fragmentation of the Iraqi state after 2003 did not remain confined to its borders. Instability spread to Syria after 2011, where the civil war transformed into an internationalized conflict involving multiple powers and non-state actors.

The erosion of state monopolies on violence has produced an environment of “competitive sovereignty,” in which central governments coexist with autonomous paramilitary forces. This model reduced strategic predictability and increased the likelihood of indirect confrontations. The proliferation of

weaponry, including short-range missiles and drones, intensified the capacity of sub-state actors to challenge conventional forces.

From a systemic point of view, regional instability became fertile ground for power projection through proxy wars. Regional and external powers began to operate on a chessboard where local conflicts serve as instruments of containment and strategic bargaining. The consequence is a chronically unstable environment, in which ceasefires are fragile and political reconstructions incomplete.

## **Humanitarian Crisis**

Prolonged conflicts produced one of the largest displacement crises since World War II. Millions of internally displaced persons and refugees crossed borders towards Turkey, Jordan, and Europe. The pressure on European reception systems generated significant political effects, influencing elections and reshaping debates about sovereignty and national identity.

The massive influx of refugees in 2015–2016, especially from the Syrian war, directly impacted the domestic politics of countries like Germany and strengthened nationalist movements. The migration crisis became a catalyst for social polarization and intensified tensions within the European Union, putting intra-bloc solidarity mechanisms to the test.

From a strategic perspective, migratory flows are not only humanitarian phenomena; they are also geopolitical variables. Affected states can instrumentalize migration as a tool for diplomatic pressure. Furthermore, the social instability resulting from poorly managed integration can weaken the political cohesion of liberal democracies, affecting their capacity for external projection.

## **International Polarization**

The legitimacy of interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan was widely contested in multilateral forums. Disagreements among traditional allies regarding the legality and strategic opportunity of military actions weakened the perception of Western unity. The erosion of consensus impacted the normative credibility of principles such as humanitarian intervention and the promotion of democracy.

Revisionist powers exploited this scenario. The narrative of American unilateralism served as an argument for contesting the international liberal order. Questioning the coherence between democratic discourse and interventionist practice reduced the persuasive power of Western coalitions in global debates.

From a structural perspective, as discussed in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, great powers tend to take advantage of moments of hegemonic wear and tear to expand their influence. The perception of strategic exhaustion of the United States after two decades of wars contributed to regional realignments and the strengthening of geopolitical alternatives.

Furthermore, the primacy of the political over the military — a central principle in *On War* — proves fundamental to understanding the mismatch between stated objectives and results obtained. When military strategy is not fully integrated into a sustainable political architecture, tactical success can produce adverse strategic effects.

## **Systemic Effects**

The combination of state fragmentation, humanitarian crisis, and international polarization has produced a more volatile international environment. Unstable regions have become incubators of extremism, while liberal democracies have faced internal challenges that have limited their capacity for external leadership.

The result has been not only regional weakening but a gradual redistribution of power and influence in the international system. The strategic overload associated with prolonged wars has reduced American room for maneuver in other critical arenas, altering global priorities.

The regional and global impacts of conflicts in the Middle East transcend the original theater of operations. Political destabilization, humanitarian crisis, and international polarization interact cumulatively, producing lasting structural effects.

The attempt to reshape the regional order through force has triggered processes that have weakened states, strained alliances, and amplified systemic competition. The strategic legacy is not limited to battles won or territories regained, but to the transformation of the international environment towards greater uncertainty and less normative cohesion — conditions that increase the risk of future crises with the potential for global reach.

### **Limits of Military Power and the Need for Strategic Redefinition**

The accumulated experience in the Middle East since 2001 reveals a central paradox of contemporary power: conventional military superiority may ensure rapid victories on the battlefield, but it does not guarantee lasting political results. The dissociation between tactical success and strategic consolidation has become a constant in the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns.

The Clausewitzian principle of the primacy of the political — developed in *On War* — remains central to understanding this mismatch. War is an instrument of politics; when political objectives are ambiguous, maximalist, or disconnected from local sociopolitical realities, the use of force tends to produce cumulative collateral effects. Institutional transformation requires endogenous legitimacy, minimal social pacts, and a political elite capable of internalizing governance responsibilities. None of these elements can be imposed exclusively by external coercion.

## **The Structural Limits of Foreign Policy Engineering**

The attempt at state reconstruction under foreign tutelage faces three structural obstacles:

- Asymmetry of legitimacy — Externally supported governments are often perceived as dependent or imposed.
- Divergent temporality — Interventionist democracies operate under short electoral cycles; institutional reconstructions require decades.
- Increasing costs of prolonged occupation — Financial, human, and reputational.

The result is a gap between strategic ambition and the interventionist's domestic political sustainability. The erosion of internal support limits the continuity of long-term policies, creating cycles of retraction and return.

## **Militarization of Political Conflicts**

Another fundamental limit lies in the tendency to convert political crises into predominantly military challenges. Insurgency, sectarianism, and extremism are complex socio-political phenomena; treating them as exclusively security problems generates incomplete solutions. The elimination of insurgent leaders may temporarily disrupt networks, but it does not eliminate the structural conditions that sustain violent mobilization.

Strategic coercion, as analyzed in *Arms and Influence*, depends on credibility and clear communication of limits. However, when applied in fragmented environments with multiple armed actors, its effectiveness is reduced. Classical deterrence presupposes unitary rationality; contemporary conflicts involve fluid coalitions and divergent incentives.

## **The Middle East as an Arena of Systemic Competition**

The Middle East has ceased to be merely a regional theater and has become a space of indirect competition between great powers. The intermittent presence of the United States, the expansion of Iranian influence, and the selective engagement of external actors have created a system of unstable equilibrium.

From a structural perspective inspired by The Tragedy of Great Power Politics, strategically relevant regions tend to be arenas of dispute when the international system transitions to multipolarity. In such a context, local crises acquire an expanded dimension because:

- They affect critical energy routes.
- They involve formal allies of major powers.
- They function as testing grounds for military and technological capabilities.
- They can serve as bargaining chips in broader negotiations.

The interconnection between regional conflict and global structure increases the risk of “horizontal escalation,” in which a localized incident triggers responses in multiple theaters.

## **Systemic Transition and Vulnerability to Escalation**

During periods of power transition, strategic predictability decreases. The hierarchical clarity typical of unipolar systems gives way to more fluid arrangements. Regional powers perceive greater room for maneuver; revisionist actors test limits; alliances become less cohesive.

In this environment, military interventions produce broader indirect effects than initially anticipated. Instability in the Middle East connects to global competition for influence, amplifying the potential for systemic crises.

### **Need for Strategic Redefinition**

The main strategic implication is not isolation or automatic retreat, but a redefinition of priorities and instruments. A sustainable strategy requires:

- Integration between realistic political objectives and available means.
- Emphasis on preventive diplomacy and regional security arrangements.
- Reduced dependence on exclusively military solutions.
- Rigorous assessment of long-term costs before interventions.

Redefining strategy implies recognizing that military power is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for lasting stability. In complex and fragmented systems, stability emerges from a combination of political legitimacy, regional balance, and careful management of escalations.

### **The Shadow of a Global War**

The trajectory of American conflicts in the Middle East since 2003 exposes a succession of strategic decisions shaped by transformative ambition and an incomplete understanding of regional sociopolitical complexity. The stated intention to promote stability through democratization encountered realities fragmented by sectarian cleavages, historical rivalries, and fragile institutional structures. The result was not the consolidation of a regional liberal order, but a multiplication of poles of instability.

The systemic consequence was twofold: internally, states fragmented; externally, space opened up for greater projection of revisionist actors and for indirect competition between great powers. Instability became structural, not episodic.

Democracy, when promoted coercively without an endogenous institutional base, can become a vector of disorganization. Political legitimacy cannot be exported by decree nor consolidated solely by force. According to the central principle established in *On War*, the use of force must be subordinated to clear and viable political objectives. When the ends are maximalist and the means do not contemplate institutional sustainability, war ceases to be a rational instrument and begins to generate autonomous effects.

## **From Regional Conflict to Systemic Risk**

The contemporary danger lies not only in the continuation of local wars, but in the interaction of these crises with the competition between nuclear powers. In an international environment characterized by a transition to multipolarity, as described in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, strategic regions become points of friction where structural rivalries manifest themselves.

- The Middle East remains central for three reasons:
- Concentration of critical energy resources.
- Presence of formal allies of great powers.
- Intersection between ideological, religious, and geopolitical rivalries.

In such a context, localized incidents can acquire an expanded dimension. A confrontation involving American, Iranian, or Israeli forces, for example, can generate automatic alignments, activate defense commitments, and trigger horizontal escalations.

## **The Nuclear Factor and Unintentional Escalation**

The shadow of a global war is intrinsically linked to the existence of nuclear arsenals and the logic of deterrence. The theory of strategic coercion presented in *Arms and Influence* emphasizes that stability depends on clear

communication of limits and mutual rationality. However, environments saturated by multiple armed actors reduce predictability.

**The contemporary risk is not necessarily a deliberate decision for total war, but a cumulative miscalculation:**

- Misinterpretation of intentions.
- Disproportionate responses to indirect attacks.
- Gradual escalation in multiple theaters simultaneously.
- Domestic pressures that limit the margin for de-escalation.

In complex systems, tactical decisions can produce irreversible strategic effects.

### **Potentially Catastrophic Consequences**

A global conflict involving major powers in the 21st century would have qualitatively distinct characteristics from previous wars:

- Global economic interdependence — Collapse of supply chains, financial markets, and energy systems.
- Enhanced technological capacity — Massive cyberattacks against critical infrastructure, satellites, and power grids.
- Weapons of mass destruction — Risk of limited use or nuclear escalation.
- Global humanitarian impact — Unprecedented population displacements, food crisis, and health collapse.
- Contemporary interconnectedness transforms interstate war into a civilizational crisis. Unlike past regional conflicts, a confrontation between major powers would simultaneously affect global security, economy, and governance.

## **The Strategic Alert**

The alert is not fatalistic, but prudential. History demonstrates that major wars often emerge from the accumulation of poorly managed crises, not from isolated decisions. The persistence of structural instability in the Middle East, combined with increasing competition between nuclear powers, keeps the risk latent.

- Avoiding a catastrophic scenario requires redefining instruments of power:
- Prioritize preventive diplomacy and permanent crisis management channels.
- Strengthen multilateral de-escalation mechanisms.
- Integrate military deterrence with realistic political objectives.
- Recognize the limits of foreign policy engineering.

Stability will depend less on episodic displays of force and more on the ability to align military means with sustainable political ends. The central strategic lesson of the last two decades is clear: when transformative idealism ignores structural complexity, the effects can transcend regional borders and alter the global balance.

The shadow of a global war is not inevitable. However, it becomes more noticeable when regional crises persist without political resolution and when rivalries between great powers intensify in highly militarized environments.

The 21st century presents unprecedented destructive capabilities and equally unprecedented levels of interdependence. The convergence of these factors means that a strategic error today would have exponentially greater consequences than in the past.

The real challenge is not winning regional wars, but preventing them from becoming catalysts for systemic conflict. Strategic prudence, coherence between means and ends, and explicit recognition of the limits of military

power constitute not only academic recommendations, but imperatives for collective survival.

## **Read:**

Secretary-General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict in Iraq (2022) — official report by the Secretary-General detailing the impacts of conflict on children in Iraq:

<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/705427>

Secretary-General's Report on Children and Armed Conflict in Iraq (2019) — previous analysis, covering the period of insurgency and the emergence of ISIS: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3848619>

List of reports related to ISIL (Da'esh) and Security Council sanctions (open PDF) — report by the Security Council analysis team including data on ISIS: [https://digitallibrary.un.org/nanna/record/4076001/files/S\\_2025\\_71\\_Rev.1-EN.pdf](https://digitallibrary.un.org/nanna/record/4076001/files/S_2025_71_Rev.1-EN.pdf)

UN Security Council Meeting on the Middle East (October 2023) — speech by Secretary-General António Guterres defending the protection of civilians and respect for international law: <https://brasil.un.org/pt-br/250428-reuni%C3%A3o-do-conselho-de-seguran%C3%A7a-da-onu-sobre-o-orientem%C3%A9dio>

United Nations experts warn that ISIS continues to pose an active threat — coverage of the UN Security Council briefing on persistent Islamic State activity: <https://apnews.com/article/7dd21baac2e0b0ac5c2c51595f561b24>

SOFI 2025 Report — State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World (UN) — details the impact of conflicts as one of the factors intensifying food insecurity in the Middle East Medium: <https://pt.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/28/inquerito-da-onu-revela-que-a-fome-atinge-dramaticamente-o-medio-orientee-a-africa>

Information compiled by the European Union Agency on Conflict and Sanctions reports — list of UN Security Council reports with direct links to public documents: <https://www.euaa.europa.eu/country-origin-information-report/public-sources>

<https://thegreatestbooks.org/books/32585>

**Please note:** If you wish to contact the author, please state the topic to be discussed. Thank you.